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Blue Jay

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## The Blue Jay

By WILLIAM DUTCHER

President of the National Association of Audubon Societies

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### National Association of Audubon Societies

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"And startle from his ashen spray,  
Across the glen, the screaming Jay."

It certainly is a tyro in bird study who does not know this noisy braggart fellow with his inquisitive ways. Such characteristics usually repel, but in the case of the Blue Jay they rather attract, and no one can help admiring this conspicuous member of the Corvine family. He has all the cunning of his somber-hued cousins the Crows, but not their sedateness; he is life and activity personified.

Another member of this family, the Magpie, attracted the notice of both Aristotle and Pliny, the former of whom says, "the Pica oftentimes changes its notes, for almost every day it utters different cries. When acorns grow scarce, it gathers them and keeps them hidden in store." The first statement refers undoubtedly to the power that the Magpies and Jays have of imitating the notes of other birds. The habit of storing food is also practiced by the American members of the family.

Pliny says, "not only do they learn, but they delight to talk, and, meditating carefully and thoughtfully within themselves, hide not their earnestness. They are known to have died when overcome by difficulty in a word, and, should they not hear the same things constantly, to have failed in their memory, and while recalling them to be cheered up in wondrous wise, if meanwhile they have heard that word. Nor is their beauty of an ordinary sort, though not considerable to the eye; for them it is enough honour to have a kind of human speech. However people deny that others are able to learn, save those belonging to the group which lives on acorns—and of these again those with the greatest ease which have five toes upon each of their feet; nor even they except during the first two years of life."

These two curious and interesting bits of ancient natural history show conclusively that the present interest in nature is by no means new.

Audubon, although he admired the beauty of the Blue Jay, did not give him a good reputation as the following pen picture shows: "Reader, look at the plate on which are represented three individuals of this beautiful species,—rogues though they be, and thieves, as I would call them, were it fit for me to pass judgment on their actions. See how each is enjoying the fruits of his knavery, sucking the egg which he has pilfered from the nest of some innocent Dove or harmless Partridge. Who could imagine that a form so



graceful, arrayed by Nature in a garb so resplendent, should harbour so much mischief;—that selfishness, duplicity and malice should form the moral accompaniments of so much physical perfection! Yet so it is, and how like beings of a much higher order, are these gay deceivers. Aye, I could write you a whole chapter on this subject, were not my task of a different nature."

Alexander Wilson esteemed the Blue Jay a frivolous fellow: "This elegant bird is distinguished as a kind of beau among the feathered tenants of our woods, by the brilliancy of his dress; and, like most other coxcombs, makes himself still more conspicuous by his loquacity, and the oddness of his tones and gestures. In the charming season of spring, when every thicket pours forth harmony, the part performed by the Jay always catches the ear. He appears to be, among his fellow-musicians, what the trumpeter is in a band, some of his notes having no distant resemblance to the tones of that instrument. These he has the faculty of changing through a great variety of modulations, according to the particular humor he happens to be in. When disposed for ridicule, there is scarce a bird whose peculiarities of song he cannot tune his notes to. When engaged in the blandishments of love they resemble the soft chatterings of a Duck; and, while he nestles among the thick branches of the cedar, are scarce heard at a few paces distance; but no sooner does he discover your approach than he sets up a sudden and vehement outcry, flying off, and screaming with all his might, as if he called the whole feathered tribes of the neighborhood to witness some outrageous usage he had received. When he hops undisturbed among the high branches of the oak and hickory, they become soft and musical; and his call of the female, a stranger would readily mistake for the repeated creakings of an ungreased wheelbarrow. All these he accompanies with various nods, jerks and other gesticulations, for which the whole tribe of Jays is so remarkable, that, with some other peculiarities, they might have very well justified the great Swedish naturalist\* in forming them into a separate genus by themselves."

Of the more modern writers on the life-history of the Blue Jay, the late Major Bendire says: "Few of our native birds compare in beauty of plumage and general bearing with the Blue Jay, and, while one cannot help admiring him on account of amusing and interesting traits, still even his best friends cannot say much in his favor, and, though I have never caught one actually in mischief, so many close observers have done so, that one cannot very well, even if so inclined, disprove the principal charge brought against this handsome freebooter."

It is an unfortunate fact that if a bad name is attached to a person or a bird it is hard work to live it down, even though the bearer has been condemned on hearsay evidence. The story of guilt may have been started on

\*Carl von Linne=Linnæus, born May 24, 1707, at Rashult, Sweden.



BLUE JAY

Order—PASSERES  
Genus—CYANOCITTA

Family—CORVIDÆ  
Species—CRISTATA











the most trivial evidence, but every time it is repeated it gains in strength and is soon magnified into huge proportions; and what might have been easily explained at the outset, by a careful examination into the facts, casts a life-long slur on the character of an innocent victim. Even so careful and exact a writer as the late Major Bendire is compelled to add, from his strict sense of justice, that he had "never caught a Blue Jay in mischief." The writer's experience with this bird is exactly parallel with that of Major Bendire, and he is therefore loth to believe all the bad stories that have been printed about the noisy, handsome Jay. In every village there is some boy who is not bad at heart, but is so full of animal spirits and life that whenever an act of harmless mischief is perpetrated it is immediately charged to him. This is very much the case with the Jay, "whose obtrusive actions attract attention when other birds, equally abundant, remain unnoticed."

Probably the most accurate brief respecting the Blue Jay's feeding habits that has ever been written is by Mr. F. E. L. Beal.\* A few extracts will show that much that has been written will not bear the scrutiny of exact scientific research. After citing three cases of field observers who saw Blue Jays in the act of sucking eggs or taking young birds, Mr. Beal adds: "In view of such explicit testimony from observers whose accuracy cannot be impeached, special pains have been taken to ascertain how far the charges were sustained by a study of the bird's food. An examination was made of 292 stomachs collected in every month of the year, from 22 states, the district of Columbia, and Canada. The real food is composed of 24.3 per cent of animal matter and 75.7 per cent of vegetable matter. The animal food is chiefly made up of insects, with a few spiders, myriapods, snails and small vertebrates, such as fish, salamanders, tree-frogs, mice and birds. Everything was carefully examined which might by any possibility indicate that birds or eggs had been eaten, but remains of birds were found only in two, and the shells of small bird's eggs in three of the 292 stomachs. One of these, taken on February 10, contained the bones, claws and a little skin of a bird's foot. Another, taken on June 24, contained remains of a young bird. The three stomachs with birds' eggs were collected in June, August and October. The shell eaten in October belonged to the egg of some larger bird like the Ruffed Grouse, and, considering the time of the year, was undoubtedly merely an empty shell from an old nest. Shells of eggs which were identified as those of domestic fowls, or some bird of equal size, were found in 11 stomachs collected at irregular times during the year. This evidence would seem to show that more eggs of domestic fowls than of wild birds are destroyed, but it is much more probable that these shells were obtained from refuse heaps about farmhouses.†

To reconcile such contradictory evidence is certainly difficult, but it

\*The Blue Jay and its Food. By F. E. L. Beal, Assistant Biologist, United States Department of Agriculture. (A valuable and interesting pamphlet for free distribution.)

†The writer knows of a case where Blue Jays are frequent visitors to a garbage vessel close by a kitchen door, even in summer, when other food is abundant,



seems evident that these nest-robbing propensities are not so general as has been heretofore supposed. If this habit were as prevalent as some writers have asserted, and if it were true that eggs and young of smaller birds constitute the chief food of the Blue Jay during the breeding season, the small birds of any section where Jays are fairly abundant would be in danger of extermination. Insects are eaten in every month in the year. The great bulk consists of beetles, grasshoppers and caterpillars. The average for the year is 23 per cent, but in August it reaches 66 per cent. Three-fourths of the Blue Jay's food consists of vegetable matter, 42 per cent of which consists of "mast," under which are grouped large seeds of trees and shrubs, such as acorns, chestnuts, beechnuts, chinquapins, and some others. Blue Jays prefer mast to corn, or indeed any other vegetable food, for they eat the greatest amount at a time when fruit, grain and other things are most abundant. The Blue Jay gathers its fruit from Nature's orchard and vineyard, and not from man's; corn is the only vegetable food for which the farmer suffers any loss, and here the damage is small. In fact, the examination of nearly 300 stomachs shows that the Blue Jay certainly does far more good than harm."

The Blue Jay has an extensive range, being found in eastern North America as far north as latitude 52, and, casually, a little further; it extends westward to about 100 west longitude, in Assiniboia, and south to about 97 west longitude in northern Texas. It breeds throughout its range, but in winter most northern birds move southward. In Florida, and along the Gulf coast to southeastern Texas there is a slightly smaller race, but the ordinary observer will not be able to note any difference. The nesting places vary very greatly as to kind of trees selected and position in the tree. Sites may be found in conifers and also in deciduous trees, and even in shrubbery. The nest is usually bulky, but compactly built of twigs, bark, moss, leaves and various other materials. A set of eggs varies from 4 to 6; the color is greenish or buffy, irregularly spotted with shades of brown or lavender.

As parents, Blue Jays are patterns. Whatever may be their reputation regarding the young of other birds, there is no question regarding their extreme solicitude for their own offspring.\*

Do not form your opinion about the Blue Jay from printed stories, but study this fascinating fellow for yourself and you will surely be captivated by his drollery and intelligence. There is certainly no more picturesque sight in bird life than to see a flock of Jays in the fall of the year flying with outspread tails, from one nut tree to another, screaming and calling to each other at the tops of their voices, or darting here and there among the gorgeously tinted foliage.

#### Questions for Teachers and Students

Is the Blue Jay found in your locality during the entire year? If not, when does it arrive? When does it leave in the fall? Give your opinion of the habits of the Blue Jay—this must be the results of your own observations of the live bird. How many different kinds of trees have you found Blue Jays nesting in? Give location of each nest and materials used in construction. Tell what you have personally observed about the food of Blue Jays. Who was Linnæus? What made him famous?

\* Read about Blue Jay life in 'A Bird-Lover in the West,' by Olive Thorne Miller.





